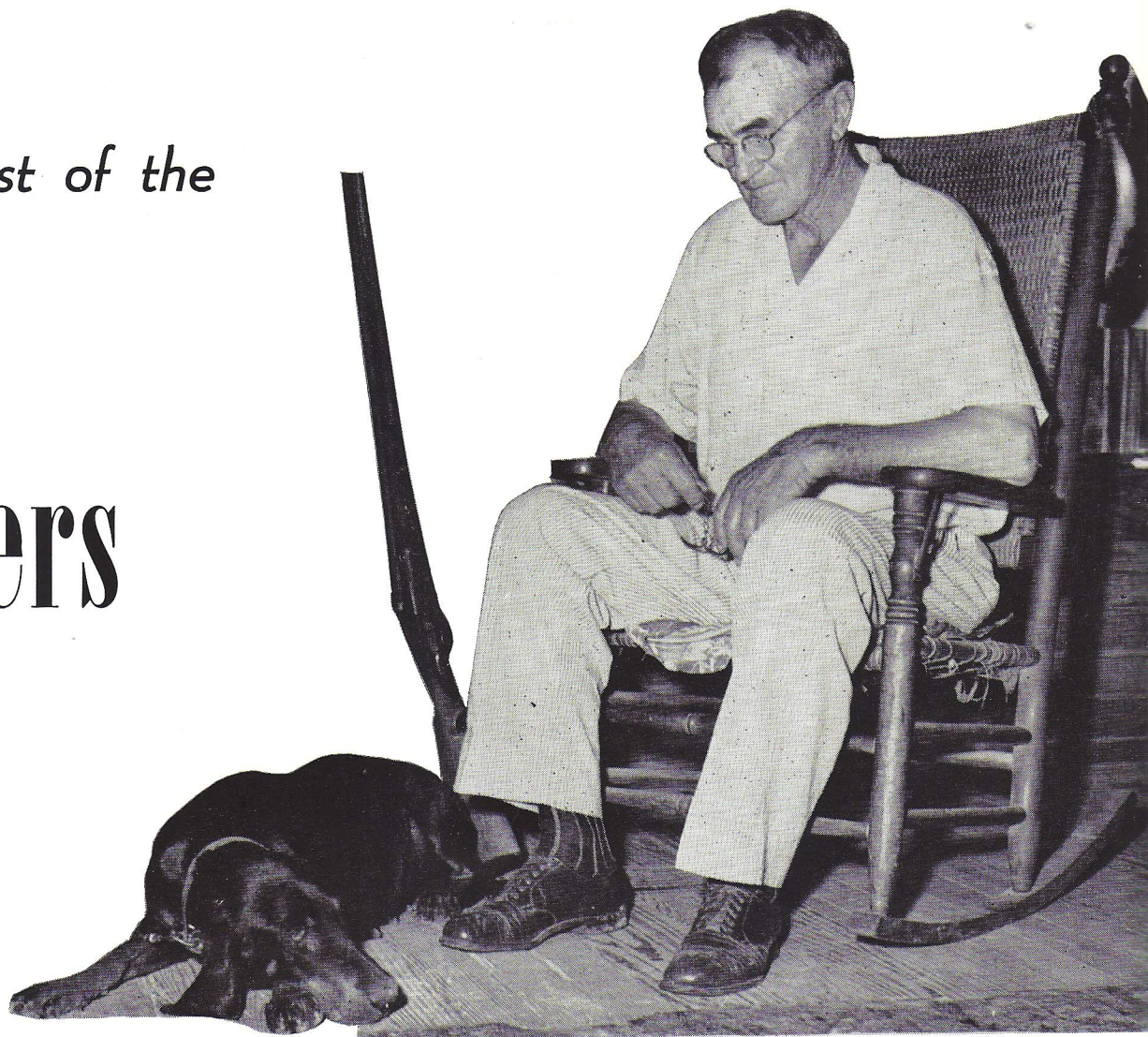


# *The Last of the* **Bear Hunters**

by

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The name "Osborn" has been legend when associated with bear hunting in Northeast Louisiana, starting in 1811 and continuing through 1917, the year when fire destroyed vast canebrakes, the natural habitat for the black creatures in Tensas, Madison, Franklin and East Carroll parishes. Even the notorious Ben Lillie learned a few b'ar hunting tricks from this family and the President (Teddy Roosevelt) borrowed the Osborn dogs to make his famous expedition to what is now East Carroll. The leader of the Rough Riders returned the favor when he invited four of the Osborn family to spend several days in the White House in 1905—and they accepted.

The last of the honest-to-goodness bear hunters, Lawrence A. Osborn, who lives in the little community of Como, located about seven miles east of Winnsboro, leaned over, patted the head of a black and tan hound and reminisced of the good ol' days when black bear were plentiful in the swamps on either side of the Tensas river. His fading blue eyes twinkled when he said, "Son, we hunted bear for meat, not sport. It's been a long, long time since I left this very house and headed a bit north and east of here to the canebrakes with my Uncles Rapp and Ichabod and Cousin John with a pack of 20 dogs trailing."

"Uncle Rapp" is the noted William Rapp Osborn who was born in 1856 and died in 1925, undoubtedly

while telling one of his favorite b'ar tales for which he became well-known as a story-teller and writer.

Ichabod, a brother of Rapp, and John Osborn, a first cousin of the only living member of the bear hunting family, died more than a score of years ago, soon after bear became almost extinct in this section of Louisiana; however, the population, through proper management and closed seasons for several years, has become sufficiently plentiful to warrant a 15-day open period—December 16 to December 31, inclusive.

"Mr. Lawrence", active for his 76 summers and still an ardent deer hunter, joined the older Osborns in their search for black bear in 1903, killing five of the big quadrupeds from 1907 to 1910.

"It was about a 12-mile ride from here to our camp in McGill Bend or to the old Brick House," he recalled. The old Brick House, a landmark in the thickly wooded area immediately east of the Ayer Game Preserve in Madison parish, was under construction when the slaves were freed during the War Between the States. It was never completed, but the tall brick columns today are fast becoming crumpled ruins, passing another chapter into recorded history—one so widely discussed by residents of this area. Treasure hunters, believing that the slave-owner of this vast estate left pots and pots of gold and silver, have helped mother nature in destroying this would-be castle on the Tensas.



"We camped on the river bank with our dogs sleeping around the campfire. These weren't ordinary dogs, you know," he pointed out, settling himself in the rocker and glancing at his dogs which had settled at his feet, undoubtedly to enjoy this story along with me and one of his grandsons. "These bear dogs were hound mixed with cur—Ford, Tarver, Robinson or Catahoula. A hound will bay but won't fight, but mix 'em with cur and they'll tackle anything," the oldtimer mused.

Asked how the chase started, "Mr. Lawrence" settled his gaunt frame in the chair, adjusted his glasses and spoke rapidly, almost as if he were directing a pack of dogs: "We'd go out and look for bear signs—tracks or feed signs made when bears piled pin oak acorn hulls, left droppings or 'stepping' roads. By 'stepping' roads I mean trails to waterholes well worn by bears which step in the first set of tracks time after time. Only one set of tracks are made regardless of the number of times the waterhole is visited.

"You can easily tell signs made by a fat bear," he grinned. "Fat ones pile up the acorns and then sit down to eat because they are lazy and don't want to scratch around for their food. They are also fond of palmetto berries.

"Fat bears won't run when chased by dogs; they just walk and fight back. We always referred to this as a 'walking fight,' but they'll finally come to bay in thick cane. Poor or skinny bears run for great distances over long periods and finally go up a tree, or you might make a kill while the chase is on."

Discussing the peculiarity of these creatures, the hunter pointed out that "when a bear is bayed by a certain number of dogs he'll stand and fight, but if one other dog joins the pack he'll spook and run again. I suppose he gets accustomed to his barking, snapping enemies and a stranger frightens him. If he is not tightly cornered he'll make a dash for safety when a hunter appears on the scene, that is, if he isn't too busy with dogs.

"When the bear was bayed I cut my way through the cane and crawled toward him, very

quietly. If you snap a twig, he'll run again. I got within 20 feet of this one and shot him in the side with double-oughts, just behind the shoulder. I crawled in on one bear and he ran so close to me that I couldn't get my gun to my shoulder. I shot him from three feet away with the gunstock under my arm. I could have rubbed his back . . . but I didn't have time right then," Mr. Osborn laughed.

He explained that the average size bear of a half century ago weighed from 350 to 400 pounds, but some of the bigger ones attained weights of 600 pounds just prior to their hibernation period, having a five-inch layer of fat under their tough hides.

"The second bear I killed on this particular trip weighed about 400 pounds and was jet black with only a trace of a white spot in his chest."

The mortality rate on bear dogs runs high at times, the aging hunter advised. "I remember one bear which killed four of the five dogs in the pack. He backed down out of a tree into the five, mauled four of them to death and took off again with the lone survivor in hot pursuit (all of them were mixed with cur). The bear must have thought the entire pack was after him because he treed again. Uncle Ichabod killed him, an old-timer which tipped the scales at 500 pounds.

"Bears are not vicious unless they are wounded. A she-bear won't fight man or dog unless she has young cubs. When she is bayed, she calmly sits down and permits the dogs to nip and bark at her, but we never did crowd a mama bear, because she commands a lot of respect," he said as a trace of a smile broke across his stern countenance. His young grandson, sitting at his feet and apparently charmed with the story, didn't catch this bit of humor, but continued to look up at the old-timer with fixed focus. This youngster was living in another world, unaware that he was merely sitting on the front porch of an old home on a hot August day.

"There's a mystery about female bears that we never did uncover. I suppose some of your scientists have, by this time. Bears breed in August and the

Ichabod, John, Rapp, and Lawrence Osborn shown on a bear hunt on Tensas River in 1907. Two bears were killed on this outing.

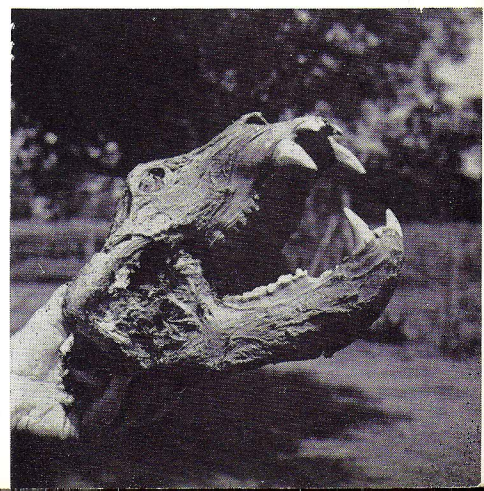


The black bear litter size is usually two, but litters of three like this one are not rare. Four is rare and five is very exceptional.

*Photo by Blanchard*

The Boone and Crockett Club, keepers of the big game records, use skull measurements as the criterion of bear size.

*Photo by Blanchard.*







While Grandson listens with wide-eyed attention, Lawrence Osborn recounts tales of yesteryear's b'ar hunts.

Photo by Blanchard.



"Ain't a guy got no privacy?"

Photo by Blanchard.

young are born, usually in February, while the mother is still in hibernation. We closely examined many she-bears in December and there was no evidence of approaching motherhood. Just couldn't quite understand this," he explained, still worried over this failure of some 50 years ago.

"We had some funny things happen on our hunts, even though we were meat-hunters. One of our gang got a bit tipsy one day and attacked a bear at bay with a hack knife. He crawled through the cane and stuck the she-bear with the heavy-bladed knife. He came out sober, however."

Recalling another experience when the hunter undoubtedly had help from Above, Mr. Osborn told about his Uncle Rapp shooting a bear down with a muzzle-loader—a double-barrel with only one hammer. Thinking the bear dead, he advanced toward his apparent victim, which had fallen near a log. The dogs which had the bear at bay joined another pack chasing its quarry. The bear gained consciousness and started for the hunter. "Uncle Rapp" fought him with his hack-knife, cutting off both front feet and a part of his nose before the shot, fired several minutes previously, took effect, taking its toll. "Uncle Rapp" vouched that this encounter was the reason he never did grow any bigger. He was 18 years old at the time and never weighed over 150 pounds, standing only five feet seven inches in height."

Asked if there was any way to find if bear were in a territory without seeing the usual signs, "Mr. Lawrence" quickly replied: "If you go into a section of the country which has plenty of cane and has not been too heavily hunted you look for hogs or their signs. Hogs will not stay in the same area with bear, so if there are hogs, you can quit hunting bear in that territory. Some bear are like 'chicken-eating' hogs, once they get the taste of a hog they'll make every meal off fresh pork."

"I remember one 'hog-killing' bear which we chased for several winters without success. He was a big one, having a track with a five-inch span. We named him 'Woodrow Wilson' because he made such a good race in 1912. This bear became the talk of every camp, and years later an enormous bear was killed in the same territory and I'm certain it was Woodrow, our elusive pet."

Queried on the tactics used by the famous Ben Lillie and the theory that the noted hunter was better than most, the oldster, a friend and hunting companion for many years of Ben, made this state-

ment: "Ben had a deaf ear when he hunted with us during the winters of 1905 and '06. Because of this he was handicapped and didn't have the success that our party enjoyed. You know when you have one deaf ear you can't course a sound (of dogs running) and miss lots of chances to kill. However, Ben returned to our area in 1908 to hunt panthers for the government. He hunted through to southwest Louisiana without much luck and later went out west, where he became famous as a mountain lion hunter."

What did the hunters who killed so many bears do with all this meat? They had many uses, according to the hunter of yesteryear. "We killed bear for lard and meat—it's better than deer. We smoked it, pickled it and made bacon from it. Bear meat is excellent as a seasoning in collard greens, peas and cabbage. At the camp we boiled the fresh meat until tender and then baked it on sticks. Bear liver and onions are 'fittin'!"

Mrs. Osborn, known as "Miss Nina" to her host of friends, was summoned to the front porch for this recipe for cooking bear meat:

Boil ham or loin until tender, with a pinch of salt. Place in oven and bake until brown. Add paste of vinegar, mustard and black pepper. When cold, slice and serve. Make gravy of drippings, adding flour as necessary, and serve on hot biscuits.

STEW—Boil until tender, add flour for thickening, stirring in red pepper and tomatoes. Mix with diced potatoes.

Getting back to the bear hunting, Mr. Osborn reached a fitting climax with the old joke: A bear marks trees by biting the bark as high up as possible, denoting that this is "his" territory. If a bigger bear comes along and bites higher, the smaller bear sees the mark and leaves the country to the larger one (they actually back up to a tree, turn their heads and bite into the bark). Legend has it that one small, educated bear, upon finding excellent feeding territory, carried a chunk to a tree, stood on the pedestal and bit far above any of the previous marks, thus frightening all contending bears from the feeding grounds.

There are a few bears left in Louisiana—in Tensas, Madison, St. Mary and other heavily wooded areas, but their range must be protected along with the animals themselves in order that b'ar hunting may continue . . . and not only in story form.

THE END